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Cultural Differences of Brain Death Focus of Lawrence University Biomedical Ethics Lecture

Posted on: May 22nd, 2003 by Rick Peterson

Anthropologist Margaret Lock compares the concept of brain death in Japan and North America and how culture and politics have influenced its recognition and impacted organ transplantation in the final installment of Lawrence University's 2002-2003 Edward F. Mielke Lecture Series in Biomedical Ethics.

Lock, associate professor in social studies in medicine at Montreal's McGill University, presents "Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death" Wednesday, May 28 at 7 p.m. in the Wriston Art Center auditorium on the Lawrence campus.

A specialist in the relationship between culture, technoscience, health and illness, Lock will examine the reasons behind widespread anxiety in Japan over the use of a brain-dead person as a resource for the procurement of organs, which until very recently had been illegal, including the traditional Japanese cultural relationship of the dead to the living and the process of dying as a social and familial event.

She will contrast the Japanese model with that found in North America where the widely agreed opinion that the clinical condition of a brain dead body is irreversible has allowed relatively easy utilitarian harvesting of organs for transplant.

Her address also will include discussion of a recently published position of several neurologists who argue that a brain dead body is not biologically dead and that death remains, as it must always be, elusive, subject only to socially constructed definitions designed to provide medical professionals with a sense of certainty

and with legal protection.

Lock, who has taught in both the departments of social studies of medicine and anthropology at McGill for more than 25 years, was the 1997 recipient of the Wellcome Medal for research in medical anthropology from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and was the 2002 winner of the Molson Prize in the Social Sciences and Humanities of the Canada Council for the Arts for her pioneering research in medical anthropology.